

Bethany College Commencement Address

May 25, 2008

President Leonard, faculty and staff, graduates and parents, I am honored by the invitation to join you. I have been on this campus many times and every association I have had with Bethany College has left me with the belief that this college is truly a remarkable institution of higher learning.

While I am honored to be here, almost from the day I accepted the invitation I have regretted it. Addressing a graduating class is one of the most difficult speeches to give. It is difficult to express one's view of the meaning of life in a meaningful way or to describe the definition of success in a successful way. Recently President Leonard visited me in Washington, D.C. and I expressed this regret. I suppose in an attempt to make me more comfortable, he told me not to worry about it: "Almost no one will be listening and those that do won't remember what you said." So, I guess I feel a little better.

Before addressing the graduates, let me first visit with some of the others that helped make this day possible. First, let me recognize moms and dads. If you ask these seniors who had the most influence on their lives, not one would say "my Congressman." Most likely they would indicate their parents. Few things in life are more important than our jobs as moms and dads. Parents, thank you for all you have done to help these graduates reach this point in their lives. For you this means turning a page as well. As your son or daughter moves on, you can take pride in knowing you have helped them take an important step forward.

I also want to recognize the role of educators--the other people these seniors would mention as making a difference in their lives. Bethany College has been blessed with excellent faculty, many who have changed students' lives in important ways--educators who taught not only the facts and figures, but also instilled a love for learning. So today I acknowledge the teachers who helped mold these lives. I hope all teachers find satisfaction in knowing that they have made a tremendous difference in the lives of these seniors. There is no more important, no more noble profession than teaching.

On this Memorial Day weekend I also want to express my respects to our service men and women--those serving today and our military men and women, our veterans who served this country in the past. These seniors, all of us, have the opportunity to pursue our goals and dreams because of the gift of freedom paid by those who served their country generation after generation.

And now to the graduates--let me visit with you about your lives and your futures. Your education at Bethany College has undoubtedly prepared you well for a job. But more importantly we are called to make a life. Not to make a dollar, but to make a difference. Not just to find happiness, but to pursue usefulness--to seek the good, the true and most importantly the eternal. Success is not achieving wealth, power and fame. Always remember that no job, regardless of salary, no indulgence, however tempting; nothing can take the place of a life committed to something other than yourself. Life is more than just being comfortable--in fact comfort may be the enemy. This nation will not be better off because we have one more millionaire, but will be better if one more person lives his or her life with integrity committed to serving others.

Alexis De Tocqueville, the French writer who studied our country in the early 1800s, observed, "America is great because she is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, she will cease to be great."

The theme of this year's election is "change." While change will happen-we will have a new president; to really effectuate change in America, we need Americans to change. Each of you graduates can make a remarkable difference in this world. If Americans are "good" our country can again be great.

We are always looking for great leaders; and while who is elected this fall to lead our nation is important, I believe we are also in need of great servants and good citizens. Although many in my generation have worked to make the world a better place, our country needs you and your generation. Just watching the evening news can be depressing. We see horrible things thought unthinkable just a few years ago. To have any hope of addressing our society's problems our leaders and our citizens must change.

Bethany College is a ministry of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and according to its statement of identity endeavors to foster Christian faith, witness and worship in the modern world. America needs such a ministry. If we Christians would better fulfill biblical instructions; if we would be changed, we would see the change in our nation that is being called for. The most successful health, education and welfare program ever created are moms and dads, families, churches and communities. It is up to citizens to renew their commitments in not only caring for themselves, but also for the world. I believe that those individuals who volunteer in their neighborhoods, churches and schools and that do so in a way that witnesses to their faith will have the greatest impact on people's lives. Indeed the consequence of this involvement, this witness is far greater than any government program or the result of any election.

From my own experience I can tell you that satisfaction does not come from economic well being, status or power in our nation's capital. There is nothing in my background that would suggest that I would grow up to become a Member of Congress-no financial or political heritage in my family-my Dad worked in the oil fields of Western Kansas and my Mom was the lady you paid your electric bill to in my small hometown of Plainville. I am a first generation college graduate that happened to find politics and government interesting. So I set a goal of being a member of the United States House of Representatives. With the help of a great many people I succeeded in reaching that goal. Being elected to Congress was something I really wanted and a sense of satisfaction with my life should have attached following my election. Despite my success something was still missing. When we set goals for ourselves, even when that goal is met, we can be left feeling empty and unsatisfied. For satisfaction comes not in meeting the goals we establish for ourselves; but instead living a life in accordance with God's will-satisfying His plan for our lives.

I came to understand that I had been granted a great opportunity to be of service to my fellow man. I was not elected to office to elevate my standing in this world or to satisfy my ego, but rather to the best of my ability to live a life in service to God and following His plan. Graduates please recognize that success comes not from the things that we accumulate for ourselves, but by living a life following God's will in service to others. Face the future with the realization that you can make a difference and that the change we desire in our nation comes in large part from what we do as individuals.

You have every right to be hopeful for your lives and futures. The world is a large and wonderful place and it is your time to step into it. You are armed with your college education and the character bred into you by family, faculty and friends. You are poised at the threshold of the rest of your life. The challenges are large and the way uncertain, the responsibilities enormous and our own abilities limited.

Our small voice tells God, "I don't know where we are going."

And God answers: "We are going forward, into the future I have shaped for you."

"But I don't know where that is"

And God answers, "I do; let's go."

"But I am afraid"

And God says: "Of course you are. Any sensible person would be. Let's go."

And we say, "But can I do all that is given to me to do?"

And God says, "I have made you, I am with you to the end. Take my hand. Let's go."

So as you graduate, you begin today with the God who made you, you walk with the God who guides you and you find completion with the God who loves you.

We need a chance to change the world. And God has always given us that. I hope that 2008 is the year of change. Our challenges are tremendous. But go with the knowledge that God is with you.

Congratulations and best wishes to the Class of 2008.